THE FORGOTTEN SERVICE IN THE FORGOTTEN WAR

The U. S. Coast Guard's Role in the Korean Conflict

by

Scott T. Price

On June 25, 1950 six North Korean infantry divisions, supported by large armor and artillery forces, brutally attacked and invaded its neighbor, South Korea. The onslaught caught the South, as well as much of the world, completely by surprise. As the Soviet-equipped divisions advanced towards the capital, Seoul, Coast Guard officers stationed on the peninsula received word that they would have to evacuate. The officers were based at the former Imperial Japanese naval base at Chinae, South Korea, where they had been training the nucleus of what would become the South Korean navy. This little known operation was a typical example of the Coast Guard's role during the coming conflict; based in obscurity but nevertheless important to the United Nations' efforts to halt and then reverse the Communist onslaught.

The United States Navy determined what the Coast Guard's missions for any post-World War II conflicts were to be. In 1947 the Chief of Naval Operations suggested that in future conflicts the Coast Guard should limit its contribution to those peacetime tasks in which it specialized. His suggestion stated that the Coast Guard's "war time functions and duties assigned should be those which are an extension of normal peacetime tasks." Additionally, "Coast Guard personnel, ships, aircraft and facilities should be utilized as organized Coast Guard units rather than by indiscriminately integrating them into the naval establishment." These duties included port security, maritime inspection and safety, search and rescue, and patrolling ocean stations. These, therefore, were the Coast Guard's primary missions during the Korean War.

CHINAE

In 1946 the U. S. Army, which commanded the military forces in South Korea, asked for a contingent of active-duty Coast Guard officers to organize, supervise, and train a small Korean coast guard. The Coast Guard quickly complied. Captain George McCabe, a Coast Guard hero of World War II and the first to command the contingent, arrived in South Korea on 23 August 1946. In fact he actually commanded the nascent Korean Coast Guard until the Korean government appointed Lieutenant Commander Sohn Won Yil as its first native commanding officer. From then on, McCabe and Sohn commanded the service jointly.

Their task proved to be extremely complicated. First, they had to establish an enlisted training facility and begin recruiting operations. Then they needed to establish an officer candidate program to train officers to command the service.

They also agreed to develop an academy, complete with a four-year degree program much like the service academies in the United States. Due to a pressing need for personnel, however, the degree program was cut to two years. Despite the language difficulties, a lack of equipment, and a high initial desertion rate, McCabe and his staff successfully nurtured the beginnings of a new coast guard for the Korean nation.

They acquired former Japanese navy warships to serve as training vessels and refurbished equipment left behind by the Japanese occupation forces. They repaired the buildings and built barracks for the trainees. In general the Coast Guard did what it has always done, successfully fulfilled an assigned task with little or no support and practically no resources. The whole structure of the training effort, however, was soon to undergo a significant change.

The Coast Guard's advisory team

In May 1948 Commander William C. Achurch arrived in Korea and became the "Head Advisor to Commander, Service Forces, Korean Coast Guard" and commanding officer of the U. S. Coast Guard Detachment at Chinhae.

When the South Korean government decided that it would change its coast guard to a navy in 1948, the active duty U. S. Coast Guard officers returned home. As one officer put it, "The U. S. Coast Guard didn't feel obligated to train a foreign navy and the U. S. Coast Guard Detachment was withdrawn." The U. S. Army then hired a number of retired or reserve Coast Guard officers and men to assist the new Korean Navy, including Commander Achurch.

Training continued unabated for the next few years. The training teams continued to struggle with a number of difficulties including cultural differences, language, and as always, funding. The base gained some notoriety when Achurch hosted a conference between the Nationalist Chinese leader, Chiang Kai-shek and the president of South Korea, Syngman Rhee for a three-day meeting in August of 1949. Later, President Rhee became a frequent visitor to the

base as his interest in his new navy grew. On the 19th of August, 1949 a World War II Coast Guard veteran, Commander Clarence M. Speight, retired from the service for a physical disability, took over Achurch's duties as "Advisor Chief, Korean Navy." Achurch remained as the commanding officer of the Coast Guard contingent. Both men wore their uniforms proudly and carried on the operation as a Coast Guard-commanded team.

Invasion

Commander Speight found himself in Taiwan preparing a new vessel for the Korean Navy when the North Koreans attacked. His wife and two children in Seoul fled to Inchon. Speight arranged for their transport on board a freighter bound for Tokyo and he then returned to Seoul. Six hundred fifty other refugees swarmed on board the freighter designed to carry only twelve passengers. Mrs. Speight and her two children stayed on the main deck for the three-day trip despite the cold weather and rain. Speight barely managed to leave Seoul and watched as the large bridge over the Han River was blown up. After crossing the river on a small boat, he eventually made it to Pusan where he met up with Commander Achurch. Both were ordered back to the United States in July. So ended the Coast Guard's role in creating a navy for South Korea.

Ocean / Weather Stations

The ocean station program, established before World War II, proved to be a vital war-time Coast Guard task and was perhaps the most direct contribution made by the Coast Guard to the United Nations' effort. Cutters assigned to the stations carried teams of meteorologists from the U. S. Weather Bureau. These men carried out weather observations, assisted by specialists in the Coast Guard crew. The cutters also served as aids to navigation by providing checkpoints for military and commercial maritime and air traffic and communication "relay" stations for aircraft on transoceanic flights. They provided needed medical services to merchant ship crews as well as any others in need and served as search and rescue platforms. Some aircraft actually ditched near the cutters and were quickly rescued, such as the famous rescue of the *Bermuda Sky Queen* by the crew of the *Bibb* in 1947.

Coast Guard cutters were stationed at two ocean stations in the Pacific prior to the outbreak of the Korean conflict. In concert with the Navy, the service decided to add three additional stations in the North Pacific. The new stations provided complete weather data and greater search and rescue coverage for the growing trans-Pacific merchant and military traffic brought on by the Korean conflict. Indeed, 95 percent of the war material bound for Korea went by ship but nearly half of the personnel went by air, making the ocean station vessels a vital link in the United Nations' logistic effort.

Furthermore, the Coast Guard established a chain of air search and rescue detachments on islands throughout the Pacific to supplement the search and rescue capabilities of the Ocean Station cutters. Cutters were also assigned to these search and rescue stations to augment their search and rescue capabilities.

With the addition of the new stations, the Coast Guard needed to find vessels to augment the already extended cutter fleet. Fortunately a ready source existed within the mothball fleets of the Navy. The Navy turned over a number of destroyer escorts, which the Coast Guard commissioned as cutters. The old war-horses had served as convoy escorts in World War II,

33 of which had been manned by Coast Guard crews during the war. These vessels were refitted with a shelter on the stern for weather balloon storage and armed with depth charges and a variety of anti-aircraft weapons. The first two to join the Coast Guard fleet were the *Koiner* and the *Falgout*. Once commissioned, the new cutters underwent shakedown training under the supervision of the Navy and then sailed to their new homeports.

Ocean station duty could be monotonous at one moment and terrifying the next, as the vessels rode out storms that made the saltiest sailors green. One crewman noted: "After twenty-one days of being slammed around by rough cold sea swells 20 to 50 feet high, and wild winds hitting gale force at times, within an ocean grid the size of a postage stamp, you can stand any kind of duty."

The *Koiner's* operations provide a good example of the duty. After she arrived in Seattle, where she joined the cutters *Bering Strait*, *Klamath*, *Winona*, and the *Wachusett*, a hodge podge fleet of ex-Navy seaplane tenders and 255-foot Coast Guard cutters, she was first sent to Ocean Station Nan in the North Pacific. There she steamed in endless circles around the ocean station for three weeks before being relieved by the cutter *Lowe*.

While on the ocean station the crew quickly fell into a routine. They assisted the five weather observers from the San Francisco office of the U. S. Weather Bureau who accompanied each patrol. Radar and radio were manned around the clock. Twice daily the crew launched 6-foot diameter helium filled balloons that measured air temperature, pressure, and humidity to an altitude of 10 miles. They launched another smaller balloon to measure wind speed and direction.

The crew also checked the temperature of the water every four hours down to a depth of 450 feet with a bathythermograph instrument. These cutters also served as a floating aid to navigation. They contacted passing aircraft and ships by radio and provided radar and navigation fixes. Such contact with anyone from the outside world, even if only for a brief moment, at least broke up the monotony for the crew. Then there were the daily drills such as fire, collision, and boat drills. For recreation they had movies, pistol matches, skeet shooting, volleyball games, and fishing. Though this was often enough to keep from going stir crazy, the crew invariably counted the days until their next liberty.

After returning to Seattle the crew of the destroyer escort received welcome liberty. Then she set sail for Ocean Station Victor, midway between Japan and the Aleutian Islands, via the Midway Islands. While at Midway she stood search and rescue standby duty, then set sail for Victor for another three-week tour of duty. When relieved there, she sailed on to Yokosuka, Japan for a twelve-day layover, which included liberty for all hands. Afterward she steamed once again out to the North Pacific to Ocean Station Sugar. Another three weeks later her relief arrived and the *Koiner* returned to Seattle. And so it went, month by month, year by year.

These cutters assisted a number of merchant ships and aircraft that were transiting the North Pacific during the war. The *Forster* assisted the largest number of vessels while on patrol. Her crew searched for and found the MV *Katori Maru* drifting and burning on 16-17 August 1952. Thereafter they assisted five more merchant and fishing vessels. The Pacific ocean station cutters in all assisted over 20 merchant and Navy vessels, including one transoceanic airliner during the war.

During 1950 Station Nan was the busiest of all the ocean stations, reporting that the cutters gave 357 radar fixes per patrol. Each patrol averaged over 700 hours on station. The cutters steamed an average of 4,000 miles per patrol. These numbers increased considerably after the patrols were lengthened and expanded after the start of the Korean conflict. Twenty-four cutters served on the stations that fell within the perimeters of the Korean conflict and thus, they and their crews earned the Korean Service Medal. Unsung but always ready, the cutters insured the timely and safe arrival of United Nations' troops and supplies throughout the Korean conflict.

PACIFIC SEARCH AND RESCUE AIRSTATIONS

The Coast Guard established a number of Pacific air search and rescue detachments throughout the Pacific in support of the Korean operation. The Coast Guard commissioned air detachments on Wake and Midway islands and increased the strengths of the existing detachments at Guam, Hawaii, and the Philippine Islands. They were on call, 24 hours a day, to respond to any calls for assistance.

One of the most dangerous search and rescue cases undertaken by the Coast Guard took place off the coast of mainland China in early 1953. Communist Chinese forces shot down a Navy P2V Neptune in the Formosa Strait while the aircraft was on a covert patrol along the Chinese coast. The crew ditched their burning plane and escaped into a life raft to await rescue. The Coast Guard search and rescue station at Sangley Point responded to the call for assistance by immediately scrambling one of its two Martin PBM-5G Mariner seaplanes. In command was Lieutenant "Big John" Vukic, one of the most experienced seaplane pilots in the Coast Guard. Vukic and his crew of seven took off and flew their large aircraft towards Communist China and imminent danger. They were followed by the other PBM shortly thereafter, piloted by then-Lieutenant Mitchell A. Perry.

After arriving on scene Vukic noticed that the seas were running 15-feet. Even though the survivors managed to climb into a raft he thought they must have been suffering from hypothermia. He decided to attempt an open water landing, always a dangerous affair but something he had done many times successfully. With darkness setting in he landed near the survivors. His crewman managed to pull these men on board while other crewman prepared a jet-assisted packs for each side of the aircraft. These devices, known as JATO [Jet Assisted Take-Off] packs, permitted aircraft to lift off in an extremely short take-off run. While the Coast Guard crew rescued all eleven in the raft, two other Navy crew, in a separate raft, were swept ashore and captured by the communist Chinese. Not knowing their fate, Vukic taxied his big PBM near the crash site searching for them.

After fifteen minutes, with the seas rising he gave up the search and attempted to take off. The JATO rockets fired as the PBM lifted into the air. Vukic remembered: "There was a 15-foot sea and a 25-mile wind." He feared that the heavy seas would swamp his seaplane if he waited for the seas to abate or a surface ship to come to their aid. Weighing each of the consequences, he decided to fly. Vukic noted that: "Everything was rolling very well and I thought it was in the bag. And so I fired my JATO bottles to help my plane get airborne." Suddenly the plane lurched to the left. He saw the left wing float rise above the sea but the port engine seemed to be losing power. He quickly decided to ditch and made for the crest

of a wave with the plane's hull. "My seat suddenly broke and that was the last thing I knew." The PBM slammed back into the sea and broke up. Once again the Navy survivors were back in the water, at least, the seven that survived this crash. Vukic managed to escape as well and inflated a raft. He pulled two surviving Navy crew in with him. He said "We were so cold we didn't care who got us, just so they had a fire to keep us warm." Two others of his Coast Guard crew, Aviation Machinists Mate Joseph Miller and Aviation Mechanic Robert Hewitt, also managed to escape before the PBM sank. These men were eventually rescued by the Navy destroyer U.S.S. *Halsey Powell* later that night. But the other five Coast Guard and four Navy crewmen perished. Apparently some of these nine men escaped the sinking PBM but were captured by Communist Chinese forces and executed as spies. All five of these Coast Guardsmen, who had died in the line of duty, were awarded the Gold Lifesaving Medal posthumously.

PORT SECURITY

Anticommunist sentiment in the country, already at a fever pitch after the communist victory in China the year before, was only aggravated by the North Korean attack. As a result, the government reacted against domestic communist activity. President Harry Truman signed Presidential Executive Order 10173, thereby implementing the Magnuson Act, which authorized the Coast Guard to conduct duties it had carried out during both World Wars to insure the security of U. S. ports "from subversive or clandestine attacks." The Coast Guard established port security units to take charge of and secure the major ports of the United States. Their function was to prevent sabotage and insure the timely loading and sailing of merchant ships, especially those sailing to Japan and Korea to deliver ammunition needed by the United Nation forces.

The most controversial power extended to the Coast Guard was the authority to check the backgrounds of merchant sailors, longshoremen, warehouse employees and harbor pilots, in order to determine their loyalty, or lack thereof, to the United States. The immediate problem with implementing these duties was the lack of personnel. There was no organized reserve program of any great scale as the World War II program had been emasculated with the demobilization of the United State's military at the end of the war. Indeed, in June 1949 there were only 252 enlisted reserve personnel, and a few women SPARs [the nickname of the Coast Guard's Women's Reserve] working at headquarters. The President, through a supplemental appropriation, approved the immediate increase in financing necessary to implement an organized reserve. The budget for the following year did show a substantial funding increase that permitted the Coast Guard to expand and develop an adequate reserve to meet the service's new demands.

Fears of a Eastern-bloc freighter sailing into a port, armed with a nuclear bomb, gave the service a unique Cold War task. Since the Soviet Union and its communist allies had no long-range bomber force and ballistic missiles were ten years in the future, delivery of a bomb by a vessel sailing into an unsuspecting port and then being detonated was the most likely form of nuclear attack on the United States. From August 1951 every vessel entering into a U. S. anchorage had to notify Customs of its intended destination and cargo 24 hours before it was to arrive. The names of these vessels were passed to the appropriate Captain of the Port and Coast Guard patrol boats identified and checked each, boarding and examining those that appeared suspicious.

The boats patrolling harbor entrances in the major ports were occupied 24 hours a day and in New York, for example, there were two stations on continuous duty. For the next two years off the coast of New York, near the Ambrose lightship station, the Coast Guard inspected over 1,500 ships. Each of the two patrols inspected an average of 40 vessels per month with each inspection lasting four hours. Armed with Geiger counters, they searched for atomic weapons, general explosives, and bacteriological weapons. Fortunately, the patrols never encountered anything worth reporting.

Another Coast Guard security duty that had a direct impact on the combat in Korea was that of the men who supervised the loading of high explosives on board merchantman. Special explosive loading detachment teams conducted the incredibly dangerous job of supervising the loading of ammunition. It was sometimes conducted under the most primitive conditions. On the coast of Oregon, for example, ammunition was transported from the Umatilla Ordnance Depot to a loading site on the Columbia River about 10 miles downstream from the Depot.

A privately owned tow and barge company held the contract for transporting government goods down the river. Coast Guard officers and men supervised the loading of the ammunition onto barges that each held 500 tons. Typically one powered vessel would push two barges at a time down the 200 miles to the Beaver Ammunition Storage Point, accompanied by an armed Coast Guardsman. The ammunition was then loaded onto cargo vessels for transportation to Korea.

LORAN STATION AT PUSAN

The LORAN [LOng Range Aid to Navigation] station at Pusan is one of the truly unsung Coast Guard stories of the war. Established to assist the growing air and sea traffic brought on by the Korean conflict, the station's crew has the distinction of being the only Coast Guard personnel serving under a Coast Guard command on the peninsula during the fighting. It was code named ELMO-4.

The prospective commanding officer of the station, Lieutenant John D. McCann, USCG, reconnoitered the area around the city of Pusan, which gave the LORAN station its official Coast Guard designation, and picked a hill some twenty miles from the city. His crew consisted of twelve men who served on a one-year tour. On June 6 1952 the U. S. Air Force generously agreed to support the station logistically, relieving the 14th Coast Guard District of such responsibilities. The support included providing for the security of the station.

Despite attacks by local vandals and some guerrilla units, as well as a typhoon in August of 1952, construction progressed with the assistance of units of the U. S. Army and logistically supported by the U. S. Air Force. By the time ELMO-4 was ready to begin operation the station boasted modern plumbing, electric clothes washing machines, and a hot water heater. McCann noted "We are probably living on one of the most comfortable bases in Korea. But don't forget that we built it ourselves. Last August all we had were tents."

The only Coast Guard outfit stationed in Korea began transmitting its signal on 5 January 1953. In concert with the other eight Coast Guard-manned LORAN stations in the Far East, including stations O'Shima Island in Tokyo Bay, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, these lonely Coast Guard outposts provided around-the-clock navigation assistance to United Nations' maritime

and air forces. Every UN vessel and aircraft utilized the new technology that permitted navigation under any weather conditions during the day or night, provided courtesy of the United States Coast Guard.

With the signing of the cease-fire on 26 July 1953, the Coast Guard, as it had after World War II, demobilized quickly. The Coast Guard abandoned the ocean stations added for wartime purposes and decommissioned the destroyer escorts. All of the overseas air detachments and search and rescue stations were decommissioned as well and the service returned to its normal peacetime operations.

Coast Guard operations during the Korean War supported the United Nations' efforts to throw back the Communist invaders. Coast Guard Merchant Marine Inspection and Port Security forces insured the safe and timely loading and departure of munitions and supplies bound for the troops in Korea. The Coast Guard also supported the transport of combat troops to Korea. Manning the lonely ocean stations in the middle of the Pacific, day in and day out, cutters on these stations provided navigation support and stood by for rescue, if need be, to transports, freighters, and aircraft bound for the far Pacific. Coast Guard air detachments stood by as well, ready to assist any in need. Finally, the Coast Guard LORAN chain provided the most direct support of any Coast Guard operation to the combat and logistic efforts against the Communist invasion of South Korea. As it had during the air offensive against Japan during World War II, Coast Guard LORAN stations provided around the clock precise navigation assistance to all U.N. vessels and aircraft throughout the far Pacific.

The Korean War left a number of legacies for the Coast Guard. Port security became a preeminent mission of the service in large part due to fears generated by the Cold War. Force levels had increased to well over what they were before North Korea invaded its neighbor. Indeed, the service almost doubled in size from its 1947 low of just over 18,000 men and women until June, 1952 when 35,082 officers and enlisted men served on active duty, including 1,600 reservists. Women also continued to serve in the Coast Guard, albeit in far fewer numbers than served during World War II. In November 1952, 215 SPAR officers and 108 enlisted SPAR's served in the reserve and 15 officers and 19 enlisted served on active duty. The final and, perhaps, most important legacy was that the future leaders of the service would look for a more active role for the Coast Guard in any conflict. Worried that its vital duties during the Korean War still left the Coast Guard in obscurity, future commandants would offer Coast Guard forces for use in combat. This is exactly what happened some ten years later during the Communist onslaught in Vietnam.

Coast Guard Units Eligible for the Korean Service Medal

1950-1954

USCGC *Bering Strait*; WAVP 382

USCGC *Chautauqua*; WPG 41

USCGC *Durant*; WDE 489

USCGC *Escanaba*; WPG 64

USCGC *Falgout*; WDE 424

USCGC *Finch*; WDE 428

USCGC *Forster*; WDE 434

USCGC *Gresham*; WAVP 387

USCGC *Ironwood*; WAGL 297

USCGC *Iroquois*; WPG 43

USCGC *Klamath*; WPG 66

USCGC *Koiner*; WDE 431

USCGC *Kukui*; WAK 186

USCGC *Lowe*; WDE 425

USCGC *Minnetonka*; WPG 67

USCGC *Newell*; WDE 442

USCGC *Planetree*; WAGL 307

USCGC *Pontchartrain*; WPG 70

USCGC *Ramsden*; WDE 482

USCGC *Richey*; WDE 485

USCGC *Taney*; WPG 37

USCGC *Wachusett*; WPG 44

USCGC *Winnebago*; WPG 40

USCGC *Winona*; WPG 65

Commander, Coast Guard Far East Section, Tokyo

Coast Guard Merchant Marine Detachment, Japan

LORAN Station Bataan

LORAN Station Pusan

LORAN Station Ichi Banare, Okinawa

LORAN Station Iwo Jima

LORAN Station Matsumae, Hokkaido

LORAN Station Niigata, Honshu

LORAN Station Oshima, Honshu

LORAN Station Riyako Jima

LORAN Station Tokyo, Honshu

U. S. COAST GUARD KOREAN WAR CHRONOLOGY

26 JUNE 1950

Retired Coast Guard officers, hired to help train the Korean Navy, are ordered to evacuate the Korean peninsula. The first Coast Guard contingent arrived in South Korea on 13 September 1946 to train a Korean "coast guard." The active duty officers came back to the U.S. when the Koreans decided to establish a navy in lieu of a "coast guard." Retired officers were then recruited to train the nascent naval force.

9 AUGUST 1950

Congress enacts Public Law 679, known as the Magnuson Act, which charged the Coast Guard with ensuring the security of the United States' ports and harbors, reinstituting a duty carried out during both World Wars. The Coast Guard establishes 29 new port security units to fulfill the task. The primary concern of the Coast Guard was to prevent sabotage of military cargoes bound for Japan and Korea. The law also authorized the Coast Guard to determine the loyalty of U.S. licensed merchant sailors, one of the more controversial duties assigned to the service since the Coast Guard enforced Prohibition.

20 JUNE 1951

The Coast Guard commissions two former-Navy destroyer escorts, the *Foster* and *Koiner*, the first two of a total of twelve that ultimately join the Coast Guard fleet. They were assigned to newly established ocean-weather stations in the Pacific designed to assist merchant and air traffic bound to and from the Korean peninsula. They provided accurate and up to date weather information, served as radio relay stations, and search and rescue platforms. The Coast Guard established new air search and rescue stations on Wake, Midway, and Adak islands as well.

20 DECEMBER 1951

The cutter *Koiner*, homeported at Seattle, assisted the tanker *Bulkfuel* and escorted it to safety.

16-17 AUGUST 1952

The cutter *Forster*, while on Ocean Station Sugar, searched for and found the merchant vessel *Katori Maru* drifting and burning. The vessel was not salvageable and sank soon thereafter.

16 OCTOBER 1952

The Coast Guard establishes a Merchant Marine Detail in Yokohama, Japan to deal with the increased merchant marine traffic through Japan as a result of the Korean conflict.

5 JANUARY 1953

Coast Guard LORAN Station Pusan, code-named Elmo 4, commenced transmitting. The LORAN station, along with the other stations in the Far East Chain, guided both merchant and air traffic in the region.

18 JANUARY 1953

A Coast Guard PBM-5A, based out of Sangley Point, Philippines, crashed after attempting to take off in heavy seas near the coast of China. The crew had just rescued the survivors of a U.S. Navy P2V that had been shot down by Communist Chinese forces while it was flying a surveillance flight. Four Navy and five Coast Guard personnel perished in the crash. The survivors were rescued the following day by a U.S. Navy destroyer.

15 MAY 1953

The cutter *Forster*, homeported in Honolulu, assisted the merchant vessel *Creighton Victory*.

12 JULY 1953

The cutter *Finch*, while on Ocean Station Nan, unsuccessfully searched for the downed Transoceanic Plane 806 in the vicinity of Midway Island.

30 JULY 1953

The cutter *Lansing*, homeported in Honolulu, assisted the grounded merchant vessel *Hawaii Bear* at Maculabo Island.

19-20 SEPTEMBER 1953

The cutter *Ramsden*, while on Ocean Station Uncle, stood by the USNS *Private Frank J. Petrarca*, until relieved by a tug.